



Harassment In the Workplace

Harassment is not a joke. It is cruel and destructive behaviour against others that can have devastating effects. Harassment, by co-workers in particular, is contrary to our basic union principles of solidarity and equality.

It is an expression of perceived power and superiority by the harasser(s) over another person, based on their: sex, race, creed, colour, religion, ethnic origin, place of origin, sexual orientation, political affiliation, gender identity, gender expression, marital status, family status, disability, language, age, conviction for which a pardon has been granted, social and economic class, activism and participation in the union.

Harassment on any of these grounds can be made the basis of a complaint to most provincial and federal human rights commissions.

Harassment can be defined as any unwelcome action by any person, in particular, by management, customer, client and/or co-worker, whether verbal or physical, on a single or repeated basis, which humiliates, insults or degrades.

“Unwelcome” in this context means any actions which the harasser knows, or ought reasonably to know, are not wanted by the victim of the harassment.

Sexual harassment is any unwanted attention of a sexual nature, such as remarks about appearance or personal life, offensive written or visual actions, like graffiti or degrading pictures, physical contact of any kind, or sexual demands.

Racial harassment is any action, whether verbal or physical that expresses or promotes racial hatred in the workplace such as racial slurs, written or visually offensive actions, and jokes or other unwanted comments or acts.

Harassment based on religion includes defamation of religious imagery, mockery of religious practices, customs or religious wear, etc. It may involve singling out a person or a group for mistreatment based on their actual or perceived religion.

Bullying and personal harassment are deliberate actions such as offensive, malicious and/or cruel behaviour with the aim to humiliate, intimidate, undermine, or destroy the character or confidence of an individual or group of individuals, which may include teasing, ridicule, mobbing, repeating gossip or any other act or words that could psychologically hurt or isolate a member from other members, clients or peers. The policy includes any member in any type of relationship for example, domestic, intimate, common law partnerships.

By pitting certain groups of workers, such as women or workers of colour, against others, harassment creates a climate of intolerance and division among the membership. By eroding our unity and strength, it can weaken our effectiveness at the bargaining table or on a picket line.

It is the responsibility of management to ensure that the workplace is free of harassment. But just leaving the issue up to management is not good enough. Many of our employers still do not have harassment policies and processes to deal with complaints. If that is the case, we urge all locals to use the following procedure set out in this policy. Further, we strongly recommend that locals negotiate in their collective agreement the UNIFOR Harassment in the Workplace policy including the joint procedure.

Our goal as a union must be to help create a workplace environment free of harassment. That means not only dealing with complaints when they arise, but also watching for instances of harassment and confronting the source.

The role of local union is crucial in combating harassment. If a worker believes that he or she is being harassed at work and wants help, the incident must be brought to the immediate attention of the unit chairperson and the local union president.

The experience of harassment can be overwhelming for the victim. People often react with shock, humiliation and intense anger. Therefore, the victim of harassment may not always feel comfortable going through the normal channels for resolving such a problem.

Because of the sensitive and personal nature of harassment complaints, especially racial and sexual harassment; the victim may prefer initially to seek other assistance. This could be any local union elected person or official, including a workplace women's advocate, member of the women's committee, human rights committee and employment equity committee. This person could assist the harassment victim in bringing the incident(s) to the attention of the top local union leadership.

The local union president and the unit chairperson must contact the UNIFOR national representative, and if necessary, they will meet with a senior company representative(s) to carry out an investigation. The issue must be handled with confidentiality, and is to be resolved within 10 working days of notifying the unit chairperson and local union president. An extension to the ten day time limit may be granted with written request to the National President's office.

The national representative must notify the UNIFOR national human rights department about the complaint and its resolution.

Any resolution of harassment complaint must reflect the serious nature of such acts, and send a clear signal that they will not be tolerated.

All of us, as union members must challenge harassment whenever it occurs. We must ensure that the dignity of our brothers and sisters is not threatened by harassment.